

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Robert J. Papp's Annual Leadership Address

to the

Coast Guard Academy Corps of Cadets

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Good Afternoon, Shipmates!

You know, just like when we're underway, there are times in life when we stop and take a fix - to be sure of our position and assess our progress.

When you take a fix, you shoot 'lines of position' to certain fixed objects. Hopefully those LOPs cross and give you a nice, tight, pinwheel fix.

But to get a good fix, you have to have reliable objects to shoot those bearings to....

The preference for fixed aids is obvious – you want to shoot your line of position to an object whose position known and certain, anchored to the earth.... The same is true when you take a fix of your position in life.....

Whether it's your family, your religion, the Constitution, your Commission, or some other document, or person, or institution....we should all have those bedrock things against which we measure our position in our life and in our chosen profession.

The Academy is one of those things for me, and it is terrific to be back here to take a fix on my position.

I hope it's not too soon for you to feel the same way about the Academy. Maybe it's hard to feel that way while you are still getting demerits and not getting enough sleep! Some things come only with time and perspective. I know for some of you it's been the most challenging and difficult period of your life. You should be proud of your accomplishments so far.

I know it's been hard, and we make it hard for a reason. As the old saying goes, "the hottest fire yields the strongest steel".

And we need the strongest steel.....

We need the strongest steel because we face – and will continue to face – many challenges out there.

We have a challenging budget environment. Our nation is making difficult but necessary decisions to enable us to cut our deficit and put our fiscal house in order. These decisions include reductions in our own Department's spending. And after a decade of significant budgetary growth, it also includes reductions in Coast Guard spending.

And our challenges don't stop there.

We continue to watch the creation of a new ocean in the arctic, and the traffic and commercial activity and tourism that come with it will challenge us in terms of both resources and strategy. But as human activity increases, so must our presence.... we have the authorities, the responsibility, and an obligation to be there.

We are constantly on guard against the threats of terrorism and homegrown violent extremists and the very real danger they present to our ports and our people.....

We continue to face smugglers and transnational criminal organizations that are growing bolder and more determined in their efforts to bring drugs and illegal migrants across our borders and to our shores....

And we continue the day-to-day duties of Search and Rescue, Aids to Navigation and Marine Safety....

Those are our external challenges and threats. There are also internal challenges that continue to trouble me....

We still work to deal with the problems of alcohol abuse, sexual assault and inappropriate relationships. Despite all of the training, all of the work we have done as a service, these problems continue to haunt us.

I work hard every day to confront and deal with those things at a Service-wide, policy level. As leaders here, and, in a very short time, as leaders of our Coast Guard men and women in the field, you have responsibility for dealing with those things on a very personal level. We need your help, and I have faith in your ability. There is simply no higher responsibility we have as leaders – and everyone here is a leader, or you would not be here.

You will be the one with the responsibility for keeping people safe and making them understand and internalize the perils that come with alcohol abuse....

You will be the one who has a shipmate knock on your door and tell you they have been the victim of sexual assault; that any sense of trust and security they once had has been shattered....

You will be the one to confront all of these problems and more.....

For these challenges – and the others that will surely come your way – we need strong steel....

....Because what you are doing here is building a foundation. And for a strong foundation, you need strong steel.

Without a strong foundation, anything you build later will eventually collapse. Whether it's a house, a monument, a ship, or a career....

As you all know, a keel is the foundation of a ship. It runs from bow to stern and serves as the foundation for the rest of the ship's structure. It is the major source of strength for the hull, and for the superstructure above that.

The same is true of you and what the Academy is doing here.... And as the Academy helps you build your foundation – helps lay your keel – for your Coast Guard career (and your life), one of the most important things for you to start building, as a fundamental part of that foundation, is what I'd like to talk with you about this morning.

It's something that I have been talking about since I became Commandant – and something you will continue to hear me talk about as you start your Coast Guard careers. It's what our ETHERIDGE Shipmates in the video were just talking about.

It's proficiency.

How many of you read my article on proficiency?

I hope all of you have – and read it over again. I've been told it also has been the subject of discussions here as well.... That's good. Because I want to use that as a baseline today and then dig a little deeper into what I'm talking about.... And why it matters.....

During your time here at the Academy – and when you get to fleet – you will often be required to qualify at a particular job or duty. You may have a qualification book and will check off tasks as you learn and complete them...or maybe you'll have to pass an exam or complete a practical exercise... This is an important step.

But proficiency is so much more. Getting a particular qualification - whether it's Command Duty Officer, Pollution Investigator, helicopter pilot or Officer of the Deck on a cutter - is only the first step in becoming proficient. As I discussed in the article, when I talk about proficiency – I talk in terms of three separate – but interrelated – components. Each of them is critical to our Service.

I see them in our very best people and in the successful exploits of our service. And when we have accidents or failures, we can usually find – at the core of what happened – at least one of these three components is lacking....

Who can tell me what they are?

That's absolutely correct! They are Proficiency in Craft, Proficiency in Leadership, and a Disciplined Initiative.

If you want to be an effective leader – if you want to serve your crew and your country to the very best of your ability, you must master these three things. There is no short cut.

You live it. You own it. Or you fail. And we cannot afford that kind of failure – the kind that comes with shortcuts. Especially in the field, where the lives of our shipmates or the public we are supposed to protect is at stake. In a Service where leaders hold the lives of a crew in their hands, our standard must be – and is – excellence!

Let me tell you a little about how I define “proficiency”...

I provided a definition of Proficiency in the *Proceedings* article, but as I travel around the Coast Guard I still get questions...

In the article I wrote that Proficiency consists of five basic pieces:

- Training, education, qualification and certification
- Advanced knowledge, experience and seasoning.

These are things the Coast Guard provides you – starting here at the Academy. But the other three are your duty – your responsibility....

- Self-discipline and voluntary adherence to a set of rules or standards.
- Sustained drive to achieve higher levels of excellence.
- The continuous pursuit of mastery of craft.

Easy, right?

I had the honor several months ago of commissioning our second Fast Response Cutter, the RICHARD ETHERIDGE.

As you just saw in the video, these are terrific new ships. We're going to build 58 of these cutters – and I hope many of you get the opportunity to serve aboard one of them. Some of you will even have the great honor to command one as Lieutenants.

These Fast Response Cutters will all be named for Coast Guard enlisted heroes – and the RICHARD ETHERIDGE is no exception. Richard Etheridge, the Keeper of the Pea Island Life Saving Station, was a shining example of one who embodied all of these traits I'm talking about and what that can mean...

You can see behind me a picture of Keeper Etheridge and his crew at the Pea Island Station....

It's also important to notice that these new cutters are named for individuals.

I'm confident that you have learned during your time here that much of your success depends upon working with your shipmates. You lean on each other and you depend on each other – especially when you first arrive in this crucible that is the Academy.

But I'm sure you have also seen the impact a single individual can have – and how the success or failure of a single individual can often impact the success of the whole crew....Whether it's the positive difference made by someone like Richard Etheridge, or the far different result that can occur through a lack of proficiency or, even worse, a compromise of one's character, core values, or standards of conduct....

In the Coast Guard, we work together as a team to accomplish our mission, each Coast Guard man or woman is an individual who is capable – and expected – to make a difference.

And make no mistake. As leaders you will make a difference. Your only decision is what kind of difference that will be.

The people around you and the people you lead will pay more attention to what you do than what you say in deciding what it means to be a Coast Guardsman. That's the responsibility you are seeking to earn here. Every decision an officer makes, every action he or she takes, is a model – a precedent – for the future actions of those they lead.

RICHARD ETHERIDGE provides a terrific example that one person – with proficiency – can truly make a positive difference.

You'll remember that I talked a little about Richard Etheridge when I spoke with you last year. In fact, I talked a quite a bit about history last year. I talked about the crew from the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving station and told you about LT Frank Erickson and his pioneering work using helicopters for search and rescue. I also told you about the Cutter BLACKTHORN and the heroic actions of Seaman William "Billy" Flores.

I also talked to you last year about my desire to get a group together to design a Coast Guard history program here at the Academy. Here we are a year later, and that course is a reality – and a requirement for all new cadets. Half of the 4th Class cadets have completed the course and the other half are taking it now. We also have an upper-level seminar for the upper classmen who did not have the opportunity to take the new course.

I first began to study the history of Richard Etheridge as we prepared to Commission our first Fast Response Cutter. I read the book "Fire on the Beach" – the story of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station – and was impressed not only by the amazing story of these individuals, but by how much about Richard Etheridge and his crew is current and relevant and instructive in our present day Coast Guard.

I've always been a student of history, and as I travel and talk to different audiences, I often talk in terms of our history.

I've heard the argument that the study of our Service's history is "living in the past".... focusing on our wake instead of looking over the horizon to ensure we remain the most modern and capable Coast Guard on earth.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, I recently saw an article in Harvard Business Review that crystallized and reaffirmed what I have always known about the study of history – that a sophisticated understanding of the past is one of the most powerful tools we have for shaping the future; that the Coast Guard's store of experience – its evolving culture and capabilities, its interactions with other agencies and other nations, and the individuals it honors as heroes – influences how we think about the future and shapes the choices we have to make.

And Richard Etheridge is a perfect example.

Richard Etheridge was the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station on the North Carolina Outer Banks. In the picture behind me, he is the one off to the left there, just a step away from his crew. He rose to that position in 1880 and served there for the next 20 years.

He was the first black man ever appointed as Keeper of a U.S. Lifesaving Station. What's remarkable about that is that less than 40 years earlier, he had been born into slavery near Oregon Inlet, North Carolina, just north of Pea Island.

And only 15 years before his appointment he had become a freeman by joining and serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Here is a picture of that log book. You can see his name there at the bottom...

After leaving the Union Army he served for a time as a surfman at a nearby Lifesaving Station on Bodie Island, North Carolina. And at Bodie, he was the lowest ranking surfman at that station.

And then, in 1879, he finds himself being recommended by the Superintendent of the Lifesaving Service, Sumner Kimball, to the Secretary of the Treasury, for a position in Command of a Lifesaving Station.

In an era of such open and hostile racism, post-Civil War, why was Richard Etheridge chosen for this job?

The reason is proficiency.

You see, he was not the lowest ranking man at Bodie Island Livesaving Station because he was the least proficient surfman or the newest member to report. He was the lowest ranking man because in that post-Civil War era, black men were always listed last on the rolls.

He was actually incredibly proficient. He had grown up on the shores of the Outer Banks and knew the winds and tides and currents of that area as well as anyone.

And his proficiency was recognized by LT Charles Shoemaker, a Revenue Cutter Service officer who had been assigned as an Inspector for that District of the U.S. Life Saving Service. This inspector – LT Shoemaker – was so impressed that he took the time to write a letter to the Superintendent of the Service about what he had seen in Richard Etheridge.

By the way.... This LT Shoemaker, the inspector that visited Pea Island, had an interesting start to his career. He began with an appointment to the Naval Academy.... but in 1860 he traded the Naval Academy for a commission as a third lieutenant in the Revenue Cutter Service.

I know of the letter LT Shoemaker wrote – the one you see behind me – because several months ago my staff surprised me with a trip to the National Archives in Washington, DC to view some original Coast Guard documents.

I saw the original legislation which created the Coast Guard – the Tariff Act of 1790, signed by George Washington!

Among the other documents I saw were the rolls of Bodie Island Station in September of 1879. Richard Etheridge was there – the last name on the rolls - the lowest ranked surfman at the station. You saw that picture earlier...

It was a particular treat to see the letter written by LT Shoemaker to Superintendent Kimball in 1880. It read:

Richard Etheridge is “38 years of age ... [and] is reputed one of the best surfman is on this part of the coast...”

That’s proficiency. Those in authority recognized it and knew that it was what really mattered.

The letter continued: “I am aware that no colored man holds the position of keeper in the Lifesaving Service... I have given the matter as careful consideration as I am capable of, and have tried to weigh every argument, for and against its adoption, and I am fully convinced that the efficiency of the service at his station will be greatly advanced [by the appointment of this man to the keepership]”

During this period, the service was facing heavy criticism in the face of loss of life and property. The reason LT Shoemaker was at Pea Island was to investigate the sinking of the three-master Schooner M and E HENDERSON late in 1879. Four of the seven men aboard, including the master, were lost.

During the investigation, he found that the surfman on watch had been negligent, and the station's Keeper had lied under oath. And unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident during this time.

What the Service needed was skilled Keepers. Professionals. And that is what LT Shoemaker saw in Richard Etheridge.

Proficiency.

Despite the racism of the time, his Proficiency of Craft is what mattered most. And it's what got him the job.

It's that Proficiency of Craft that you must be developing now. Remember, I said you were building a foundation – laying your keel. Every member or frame that is left out, or mislaid, or misplaced, weakens that foundation...

Its work that starts now and never ends. And just like Proficiency of Craft got Richard Etheridge noticed, it will get you noticed, too. It is the key to success in our Service. And more importantly, it's what the oath you took requires, what the service requires, and what the American people require.... Remember, they are entrusting you with not just their safety and security, but their sons and daughters who will be in your charge. And it is what you should require of yourselves.

And it's proficiency in leadership I'd like to focus on next....

After Etheridge was appointed Keeper, the white surfman were transferred out and black crewmen from other stations were ordered in. And this new crew had a very successful first season. They proved that the placement of Etheridge in the Keeper position was a great decision.

Unfortunately, on May 29, three days after the station had closed for that first season, the station house burned to the ground. Although the culprit was never identified, an investigation identified arson as the cause.

But Etheridge and his crew would not allow those who wished for their failure to win. Etheridge and his men prevailed on land as they would at sea for years to come. Before the following season, they rebuilt their station house, from the ground up, in just seven weeks.

This is remarkable, if you take the time to think about it. And I'm not talking about the fact that it took only seven weeks to rebuild the station, despite the difficulty in getting materials out to that remote location – although that is indeed remarkable.

I'm talking about the resolve and strength of character it took to do so.... Here is a group of individuals committed only to saving lives, to the service of their fellow man.

And someone decides to burn their station down, in all likelihood for no other reason than the color of their skin.

And how do they react? They rebuild and continue their commitment to service.

Now Keeper Etheridge knew instinctively that his own proficiency of craft alone was not enough. He knew that to continue and build upon his early success that he needed his crew to be just as proficient – both as individuals and as a team. And he knew that he needed to lead them there. He understood the requirement for Proficiency of Leadership.

He developed rigorous lifesaving drills that his crew performed 6 days a week. He demanded swift obedience and required strict adherence to standards of grooming and appearance. We know how hard Etheridge trained his men because he kept meticulous records of their daily activities. Patrols, drills, training and inspections were conducted continuously. He trained his crew until satisfied they could take on any mission. And on Sundays, their “rest day”, Etheridge read the regulations to his crew and quizzed them on their knowledge of procedure.

This doesn't sound much different than the Academy, does it? And notice that he focused not just on the big things – he also focused on the details.

You've all heard the expression “Don't sweat the small stuff”, right? Well that expression is wrong. The little things matter.

...Things like maintaining uniform standards, honoring customs and courtesies, maintaining and observing our traditions – these things are the manners of our profession. They teach discipline – the same discipline that will ensure we are able to successfully conduct operations in dangerous and unforgiving environments and return safely....

And the Coast Guard still relies on – and requires – the type of leadership shown by Keeper Etheridge. It inspires us. It motivates our crews. It allows us to reach that which was thought unachievable.

I'll bet in the time you've been here that some of you have been pushed beyond what you thought you were capable of.... And if we are doing our job, you will be again.

And don't think the fact that you'll be the most junior officer at your new unit means you don't need to worry about building your proficiency of leadership. You'll be expected to lead Day 1. And one of the many great things about our Coast Guard is that we have a long history of providing great responsibility and opportunities for leadership to junior people.

That Conning Officer on the bridge of our newest cutter, at night, in dangerous waters – for the Class of 2013, that will be you in a few short months... You will be a Boarding Team Member on a high risk boarding within a very short time of reporting to your first assignment....

Richard Etheridge provides a great example of leadership – but we are fortunate as a Service to have so many great examples of leadership.

And not just those in our past – but here around us every day.

I am continually encouraged by and inspired by the leaders I see all over this Service as I travel to visit our units around the world.

And we need great leadership. As I mentioned when I started this morning, we face many challenges. And the great leadership I see gives me great hope and absolute confidence that we will meet and prevail against every challenge we face. We are truly blessed with the people we have.

But unfortunately, every so often, I also see examples of poor leadership, and of failing to adhere to our Core Values.

They are not common, but even one instance is too much and can do terrible damage. I read one commentator who wrote that sexual assault is an unavoidable part of military life. Well it's not an unavoidable part of Coast Guard life. We have a duty to eliminate sexual assault from our service.

I addressed some of my concerns a year ago this month in Shipmates 19. My message was entitled Respecting Our Shipmates – Duty Demands Courage. Most of the time when we talk about courage, we are talking about physical courage, courage our Coast Guardsmen display in the operational environment.

Courage like flying directly into a hurricane and then having a rescue swimmer jump out of a perfectly good helicopter into raging seas. We saw courage like this recently in the rescue of survivors from the sailing vessel BOUNTY.

It's also courage like we honored just last month at the memorial service for Senior Chief Terrell Horne.

When the Coast Guard Cutter HALIBUT's small boat was about to be rammed by smugglers, Senior Chief Horne reached forward - just prior to impact, without concern for himself - and he pushed his coxswain to safety.

Let me say that again. He reached forward. Towards the point of impact. And he pushed his coxswain to safety.

He did what leaders do. Instinctively. Reflexively. He put his crew before himself. He knew that those who lead in our Service hold the lives of their crew in their hands. And its courage like that – leadership like that – is the very soul of our service. [pause...]

And it's also the courage displayed by Richard Etheridge and his men in one of their most famous rescues – which I'll tell you about in just a moment....

But in Shipmates 19, I was talking about a different type of courage. I was talking about moral courage. Moral courage is driven by our principles. It is action in service to our values. Where physical courage is action despite the fear of injury or death, moral courage is action despite any perceived risk of ridicule, or loss of social standing, or going against the grain. It's doing the right thing, no matter the cost, even when no one is watching.

And when I say "Duty Demands Courage" – that means action. In our Service we have a bias for action. As I state in Shipmates 19, there are no bystanders in the Coast Guard.

We often talk of adhering to our Core Values. But there is a difference between having Core Values and living Core Values. We must always do the latter.

Whether it is sexual assault, hazing, harassment, discrimination, or any other activity that is contrary to our principles or our Core Values – whether it is conduct or attitudes we see in ourselves or in our shipmates – we must take action to stop it. These things undermine our morale, degrade our readiness, damage our mission performance and break our obligation to one another and our nation.

I reiterate this today because what you are preparing for here is not just a job, it's a calling; a profession.

I tell you these things not because I don't have faith in you. I have great faith in you.

Our Commanding Officers are handpicked.

Just like you were.

And it is the Proficiency I've been talking about – along with adherence to our Core Values – that will ensure your continued success as a commissioned officer.

And this is exactly what I tell our officer selection board and panels as they meet to decide who to promote, or who to select for special assignments or advanced education. And it is the guidance I provide to our officer corps.

And I tell them that all officers selected should demonstrate humility, professionalism and enthusiasm. They must live by our core values.

They must seek responsibility and continually work to gain experience, knowledge and proficiency.

They must display the strength of character to hold subordinates accountable for lapses in performance or behavior.

And I tell them that we will renew our leadership by selecting our very best qualified officers, and we will choose servant leaders who believe in “service before self”

I was talking about Richard Etheridge as an example of leadership... And Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership would pay off for Richard Etheridge and his crew. They would go on to rescue hundreds of souls, including their most famous rescue – the one I alluded to a moment ago - that of the E.S. NEWMAN.

The E.S. NEWMAN was caught in an October Hurricane in 1896 on her way from Providence to Norfolk. When her captain realized there was no hope for making it safely to port, he grounded his ship close to shore near Pea Island and shot off a flare. That evening the storm was so bad Etheridge had kept his men from patrolling the beach for fear they would be swept away by the tide. But one of his surfmen, who was watching the coast, spotted the distress signal and reported to Keeper Etheridge.

When Etheridge and his crew arrived on scene, it was apparent that the normal lifesaving procedures would not be effective.

Their Lyle Gun – a beach cannon used to shoot a line to a vessel in distress and establish a Breech’s buoy – could not reach the ship. (You learned about Lyle guns and rigging a Breech’s Buoy in class, right?)

Strong winds and high tides kept the E.S. NEWMAN too far off shore. Keeper Etheridge later wrote in his log “It seemed impossible under such circumstances to render any assistance.”

But that’s when we go to work, right?

And it was then that Keeper Etheridge demonstrated that final piece of the triad I spoke of – one that comes only after someone becomes Proficient in Craft and Proficient in Leadership: Disciplined Initiative.

He recognized he needed to deviate from the normal operational doctrine and exercise on-scene initiative if he was going to rescue the crew of the foundering vessel. He trusted in his crew, and he trusted the training and discipline he had instilled in them.

He directed two of his surfmen to bind themselves together with a line. These two surfmen then grabbed a second line and fought their way through the howling wind and breaking surf until they reached the foundering E.S. NEWMAN. When they reached the distressed vessel, the second line was tied to a survivor and the crew on shore pulled the survivor and the two surfmen back to the shore.

They repeated this process ten times that night – Ten times. In the middle of a hurricane. – until they had rescued all of the survivors aboard the ship.

That's disciplined initiative.

I'm pretty sure this was not in their TTP or doctrine. It was the on-scene disciplined initiative of Keeper Etheridge.

It was the Proficiency of Craft that he had instilled in his people. It was his Proficiency of Leadership in training his people and ensuring they believed in him, believed in themselves, and believed in their purpose...

But it was also the discipline that came with all they had done... Remember, I talk about Disciplined Initiative – not just Initiative. The emphasis is on the first word.... Discipline.

One of the arguments I heard when I first started talking about this concept was that this emphasis on discipline would stifle innovation.... But the actions of Richard Etheridge and his crew that night is a great example that the opposite is true. Their discipline enabled their initiative.

It is interesting to note that on the first trip out to the E.S. NEWMAN, a wave caught the leading surfman and knocked the air out of him. That wave would have carried him away and may have ended the rescue right there – and meant certain death for the crew of the E.S. NEWMAN – had he not been tied to his fellow surfman. I'm sure it took more than a little discipline to keep going after that. But what struck me was that he was bound to his shipmate the same way that training and discipline binds every member of a crew – or an Academy – to the other. While one person can truly make a difference, bound together we are unstoppable.

Richard Etheridge's dramatic rescue that night came after a career of building proficiency.... But it is critically important that you begin building yours now, because you never know when you might be called upon....

The long hours and difficult work it takes to achieve proficiency is not easy. In fact, it is hard. You know this and have experienced it up close during your time here....

Right now, you begin your journey towards true proficiency – the kind that Richard Etheridge demonstrated over 100 years ago – and the kind that the men and women of this service have consistently demonstrated both before and since.

And the purpose of this journey towards proficiency is so that when you spot a distant flare on a dark and stormy night – or when your shipmates need you – you are not only willing, but ready to respond.

When you leave here, you will be conducting front-line Coast Guard operations. We face many challenges out there. I call them “uncertain and stormy seas.” The continued flow of drugs and migrants towards our shores. Threats to our fisheries. Increased activity in the Arctic. Our mandate to protect the safe and secure approaches to American ports. And sometimes, to protect even the sea itself.

To meet these threats, you must continually build your proficiency. It will serve as an anchor to which you can hold fast in uncertain and stormy seas. And we don’t fear uncertain and stormy seas.

That’s when we go to work.

That’s when our country needs us the most. And that’s when we are at our best.

We are Coast Guardsmen.

This is our chosen profession.

This is our way.

This is what we do.

Thank you.

And Semper Paratus.